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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of grade level, program content, and ethnic match between viewer and television characters on children's perceptions of the realism of families portrayed in television series. In the 1986-87 school year, a sample of 1,692 children in 2nd, 5th, and 10th grades completed a 13-item questionnaire measuring their perceptions of the realism of their two favorite family format television shows. The three most popular shows were "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," and "Diff'rent Strokes." The 858 children who chose these shows were used as the sample. In 1989, a sample of 40 adults also completed the questionnaire in relation to these shows. Results indicated that perceived realism scores decreased with age. There was no relationship between perceived realism scores and the ethnic match between the viewer and the television family. Based on the adults' perceived realism scores, the 13 items measured for each show were divided into highly unrealistic, somewhat realistic, and highly realistic content. The children's questionnaire responses were then rescored for these three subscores. Results indicated that there were no age differences for highly unrealistic items or somewhat realistic items, and that perceived realism scores for highly realistic items decreased with age. A list of 30 references is included. (BC)

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CHILDREN'S PERCEIVED REALISM OF FAMILY TELEVISION SERIES

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The television programs children watch, and the situations and characters portrayed there, can have important socializing effects. Many studies have found that the extent to which television is perceived as an accurate representation of real life can affect what is learned from television content (Brown, Austin, & Roberts, 1988; Hawkins, 1979; Morison, Kelly, & Gardner, 1981; Reeves, 1978). The more remote a television model is perceived to be from reality, the less likely it is that viewers will take it seriously; therefore, the content will have less of an effect on attitudes and behavior. Fourth, sixth, and eighth graders' ratings of realism of prosocial behavior on television have been found to be a predictor of their social behavior (Reeves, 1978). Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, and Fischer (1983) were able to remove the relationship between violence viewing and aggression in third and fifth graders who watched a large amount of violent shows by training them to critically evaluate, among other things, the realism of television. Children aged 9, 10, and 11 who were told a violent film was a newsreel showed a greater post-viewing aggressive response than children who were told the same film was fictional (Feshbach, 1972). We know exposure to television content has socialization and behavioral effects; perceived realism has the potential to be a mediating variable in that relationship.

Perceptions of television reality are a matter of concern because often television's messages are not realistic, although their realistic depictions make them seem so. If the misrepresentations shown are assumed to be factual, the implications for individual construction of social reality are worrisome. Of special interest are children and adolescents who are continually receiving new information that may be used in building their own world views. If they assume the unrealistic content they see on television to be representative, they may construct erroneous notions about events, rules, and norms in society.

There are several variables that can influence perceptions of realism on television. One such variable is the age of the viewer. This study proposes that children's ideas about reality on television become more accurate with age, as the result of increased experience and more developed cognitive functioning. The older the child, the more exposure he or she has had to a diverse range of situations. Therefore, older children should be more discerning and accurate in their reality judgments. For the most part, this would translate to lower overall perceived realism scores, since television as a rule does not represent the real world accurately. This would be especially true for many demographic aspects of television shows such as the setting of the show and the kinds of people in the show as these tend to be unrealistic or unusual, often for entertainment value. Other aspects of television shows that are more representative of the real world, such as the emotions portrayed, may not show this developmental decrease.

Age differences in perceived realism of television have already been demonstrated. Children's responses to questions about the believability of television become more adult-like, that is, believability ratings are lower with age, although by age 14 there was still a difference between the child and adult responses (Winick & Winick, 1979), and third graders gave higher overall realism scores to "The Cosby Show" than did ninth graders (Brown et al., 1988). Dorr and her colleagues (Dorr, Kovaric, Doubleday, Beizer Seidner and Sims, 1985; Dorr, Kovaric & Doubleday,

1990; Dorr, Kovaric, Doubleday & Rabin, 1990) showed age can interact with the content of family programs to produce a significant effect on realism scores. They found that younger children did not differentiate between series about traditional families and series about non-traditional families. Older children made this differentiation; they ascribed lower realism scores to non-traditional families for most types of realism.

Additionally, studies consistently show a major shift toward a more accurate and thorough understanding of television beginning at age seven or eight (Baron, 1980; Fernie, 1981; Reeves, 1979; Reeves & Garramone, 1983). As children get older, they learn that most of what they watch on television has been scripted, acted, and edited. By the second grade, children have developed some knowledge about the production aspect of programs, can identify with specific characters, and can use television information in perceptions about real people. This television knowledge, which grows as the child matures, also has a role in the evaluation of the reality of television programs. As a child learns that television is produced for entertainment, that the characters he or she is watching are actors, and that much of television is a commercial venture, he or she may become more skeptical about the realism of television. The television set is no longer a "magic window" on reality. Older children understand that television programs are in fact not pure representations of reality; this tends to make them more skeptical about television in general. Because of this, older children would be more likely to assign lower perceived realism scores to television programs.

The decrease in perceived realism scores with age may not only be due to more real world experience or greater knowledge about television as a medium; cognitive development plays a role as well. Brown, Skeen and Osborn (1979) found a positive correlation between perceived realism scores from six- and seven-year-olds and a Piagetian test measuring conservation ability. Those children who were already conservers were better at judging the realism of two "Star Trek" segments, one live action and the other animated. Dillman (1980) found that even five-year-olds can reason about television reality in a concrete operational manner, perhaps because children are able to reason in a more sophisticated manner about domains with which they have a great deal of experience, such as television. Howe (1977) suggests that the increase with age in the understanding of television production could be a result of the onset of concrete operations and the child becoming less egocentric. In addition, other cognitive abilities that improve with age such as distinguishing between appearance and reality, and between fantasy and reality, are linked to perceived realism ability. Because these related abilities show a developmental progression, it would follow that perceived realism would be influenced by age as well (Flavell, 1986; Morison, McCarthy & Gardner, 1979). Therefore, changes with age in the ability to rate realism may be due to cognitive development in addition to increased experience.

In addition to age, a second viewer characteristic that could influence the evaluation of the realism of television is similarity to or familiarity with the television content being evaluated, or what we will call "match." This would be especially true for shows that feature families, content with which all children are familiar at some level. Match can be manifested in several ways. For example, a match between a child and a television family could exist because he or she lives in the same town as the

television family, he or she does the same kinds of things that children in the television program do, his or her family has the same ethnic background as the television family, or his or her parent has the same profession as one of the television parents. Children whose families are similar to the television families along some dimensions would tend to rate those families more accurately than would children whose families are not so much like the television family. Because of their firsthand experience with a variety of aspects of the television program, such children would have more real world information about the television portrayals that they could use to make more accurate realism judgments. In support of this hypothesis, Brown et al. (1988) found that the strongest positive predictor of perceived realism of "The Cosby Show" for third, sixth, and ninth graders was how much the Cosbys were perceived to be like the viewer's own family. Newcomb and Collins (1979) found that a match between the socioeconomic status of second-grade children and the television family they evaluated facilitated processing of program content and general comprehension.

"Match" could influence realism scores in two ways. If a child has personal experience with an event or situation presented on television, or "matches" the television family, he or she will compare the program with his/her own previous knowledge and construct a reality judgment. This child might judge such a show to be more realistic because the child has had some exposure to real world situations that seem similar to those portrayed in the television show, resulting in higher realism scores. However, a compelling argument could also be made for the reverse effect of match on realism scores. Since television tends to be unrealistic, a child who matches the television family on some dimensions might better realize that other aspects of the portrayal are unrealistic, resulting in lower realism scores. For example, a Black child might better understand that all Black families are not like the family on "The Cosby Show;" a White child might not understand this as well. Conversely, if a child has no other exposure to a situation except through television, that is, does not match the television portrayal in any way, he or she has no information for comparison. This child may accept what he or she sees on television as realistic and would tend to assign higher realism scores to the programs than would children who did have some experience with the television portrayals. The effects of match, in either direction, would be especially strong for younger children. They lack significant real world experience in many areas the television portrayals depict simply because they are young. While they can still evaluate shows that bear some resemblance to their lives, for example, shows about families, they cannot use broad real world knowledge to evaluate the realism of television shows. This may be a partial explanation for the findings, described earlier, that younger children tend to assign higher perceived realism scores than do older children. Match may not have as much of an effect on the realism scores of older children, because they have more real world knowledge at their disposal and can use this knowledge to evaluate television portrayals more accurately.

Television portrayals with some obviously highly unrealistic element(s) would be an important exception to the influence of match. Most or all children who view a show with clearly unrealistic elements would assign lower realism scores to such a show, whether or not they had some experience with any aspects of the show that they could use for real-world comparisons. Many young children even have problems correctly recalling what they consider to be unrealistic portrayals with which they have

little experience, let alone accepting them as realistic (Cordua, McGraw, & Drabman,1979). Therefore, instead of simply accepting the unrealistic portrayals as reality because of no real world experience with some aspects of the portrayal, children of all ages would rate such a show as unrealistic, whether or not they had matched the portrayal on some other dimension(s).

Perceived similarity between the viewer and the television portrayal may be necessary for match to influence perceived realism of and learning from television. It is important that the viewer perceives the match between the television portrayal and his or her own life. Maccoby and Wilson (1957) demonstrated that seventh-graders who reported identification with a character recalled more of scenes and dialogue involving that character. Also, match may exist for different dimensions of the television family for viewers of different ages. Doubleday (1986) found that younger children tend to use surface characteristics of television families such as family structure or ethnicity to judge similarity between the television family and their own, while older children tend to use personal or individual characteristics of family members.

In this study, match with the television family will be measured by whether or not the ethnicity of the child matches the ethnicity of the television family. One would expect that a child whose ethnicity matches that of the television family would have more experience with people of the same ethnicity as the characters in the show, and would have a stronger sense of perceived similarity to the television characters than a child whose ethnicity does not match that of the television family. This child would rate the show differently than would a child whose ethnicity does not match the television family. Since this study will focus on perceived realism of demographic variables, it makes sense to measure "match" with a child demographic variable. If similarity were measured with some other variable, such as experiencing similar situations to the television family, perceived realism of demographics might not be affected by this "match."

Contrary to what is predicted here, Newcomb and Collins (1979) found no effect for ethnic match on children's understanding of family sitcoms. This was probably due to the fact that ethnicity of the television families was linked to their socioeconomic status (SES). Their study featured portrayals of a Black lower class family and a White middle class family. The youngest Black and White children better understood the show featuring a family of the same social class as theirs, not the same ethnicity. Older children were not influenced by match at all, perhaps because their real-world experience gave them more information to use to comprehend the shows. The present study, with a mixed ethnicity, predominantly middle class sample, used two shows that feature middle class families, one Black and one White. With SES of the television family and the sample held constant, an effect of ethnic match on perceived realism was expected to emerge, especially for younger children.

In addition to age of the viewer and match with the program, there is at least one more important variable that influences perceived realism scores: the content of the program itself. Of course, a program with more realistic content would receive higher realism ratings than would a show with less realistic content. But the effects of the content of the program are not this simple. The age of the viewer should interact with

program content. For most programs, realism ratings will decrease with age, as stated earlier; however, ratings of highly unrealistic shows may not be influenced by age, since even young children should assign low realism scores to such programs.

While previous studies of perceived realism have already examined the constructs discussed until this point, many have several methodological problems. The first involves a problem with the level of specificity of referents or questions about the realism of media portrayals. When a child is asked whether or not a television show is realistic, he or she could answer on the basis of the characters, the events, social expectations, or usefulness of the content. One should remember that to a child "reality," broadly defined is what the individual child perceives to be real (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Klapper, 1981; Reeves, 1978). Therefore, merely asking a child "Is this show realistic?" may not yield informative or consistent results across subjects because they each use different elements of the show to decide whether it is realistic or not. Many realism studies use quite general items and ask subjects to evaluate the realism of broad ranges of content. In fact, very general questions concerning a program's realism are difficult to interpret, both for the researcher and the subject. Dorr and her colleagues (Dorr, Kovaric, & Doubleday, 1989) found that the most general perceived realism items were judged to be the least realistic. Additionally, children attribute maximum reality to specific characters, while more abstract content receives lower scores (Greenberg & Reeves, 1976). Therefore, the specificity of the realism items themselves will influence the findings in any perceived realism study. This study attempts to control for this problem by using many specific realism items, such as, "How many families in our country have the same kind of home as the television family?" These very specific realism questions help to ensure that all subjects are considering similar aspects of the television program when evaluating its realism. Additionally, specific realism questions help to pinpoint which aspects of the show the child believes to be realistic or unrealistic.

A second problem with past perceived realism studies involves the definition of "realism." "Realism" can be an elusive and complex construct, defined in many different ways by both researchers and subjects (Dillman, 1980; Dorr, 1983; Hawkins, 1979). Children of different ages define "real" in different ways. Second graders focus on the physical aspects of the television program (Dorr, 1983; Kelly, 1981; Klapper, 1981; Morison et al., 1981): a six- or seven-year-old may say that a cartoon is not real because it does not look real, but he or she will have more difficulty evaluating a live-action fantasy show such as "Bewitched." Doubleday (1986) found that second graders concentrated on a small number of attributes, i.e., family relationships and demographic variables and had a low level of cognitive complexity when judging family television shows. As children reach about grade four, they define real as "possible," that is, "could occur in the world" (Kelly, 1981). By the sixth grade, the definition has once again shifted, this time to "probable" or "plausible" (Dorr, 1983). Sixth graders can also judge the quality of representation by the medium and are aware of scripts, actors, and the formal features of television. By grade ten, children can use the characters' personal traits depicted to judge television shows (Doubleday, 1986) with high cognitive complexity, and continue to define "real" as "probable" (Dorr, 1983). It is important to keep these developmental differences in mind when assessing perceived realism, especially in cross-sectional developmental studies where subjects are from a wide range of age groups. Children of different ages may

be using different definitions of "realistic." To help alleviate this problem in measuring realism, this study has operationalized realism to mean "representativeness in our country," and the term "realism" will be used with this meaning throughout the rest of this paper.

A third type of problem of perceived realism studies involves the subjects' familiarity with the content they are asked to evaluate. Often, all subjects rate the realism of the same content or program. However, some subjects may be more familiar with the content than others. Subjects' knowledge about the specific program they are evaluating will, of course, have a large influence on measures of perceived reality. In this study each subject chose his or her two most frequently viewed shows about families to evaluate. Therefore, all the subjects were evaluating content with which they were quite familiar, to which they were often exposed to, and which was salient to them.

In summary, this study will examine the influence of grade level, specific content, and ethnic match between the viewer and the television family on the perceived realism of the demographics of television series featuring families. It is hypothesized that children who have more real world experience with people and events like those portrayed on specific television shows will be able to more accurately evaluate the realism of television shows. "Experience" is operationalized as age of the subject and as an ethnic match with the family portrayed in the television show. In addition, highly unrealistic elements of series will be rated by all children as unrealistic and highly realistic elements of series will be rated by all children as realistic. Formal statements of these hypotheses are as follows:

H_1: Perceived realism scores will decrease with age of the subject..

H_2: Perceived realism scores will differ between children who are of the same ethnic group as the television family ("ethnic match") and children who are of a different ethnic group.

H_3: Perceived realism scores will differ by age only for moderately realistic elements of family television shows.

Methods

To test the hypotheses of this study two sets of data were used. One set was comprised of the perceived realism judgments of second, sixth, and tenth graders who were participating in a large study of children's learning about emotions from television and their parents, conceived and carried out by Aimée Dorr, Catherine Doubleday, and Peter Kovaric. The second set was comprised of the perceived realism judgments of adults who were recruited just for the present study and tested using the same perceived realism instrument as used in the Dorr, Doubleday and Kovaric (1990) work.

Subjects

Children were recruited through both public and private schools in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, California. Both parental and child permission to participate in the study were obtained. Complete data were gathered from a total of 1,692 children from the second, sixth, and tenth grades. There were 510 second graders, 612 sixth graders, and 570 tenth graders, with slightly more girls than boys. The participants ranged from lower to upper middle class, but were predominantly middle- or upper-middle class, based on the locations of the schools. 83% of the participants were White; the rest were about evenly divided among Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities. Data collection took place during the 1986-'87 school year. As will be explained in the Results section, a subsample was selected from these 1692 subjects to test the hypotheses of this study. In 1989, 40 adults, ranging in age from 20 to 56, with slightly more women than men, were recruited personally by the first author. About 75% of the adults were White; the rest were Black. The average highest level of education completed was a four-year college degree, and the sample was mostly middle to upper middle class. The demographics of the adult sample mirror the demographics of the child sample. The children in this study are likely to be demographically similar to the adult sample when they grow up.

Procedures

Children participated at their schools. The realism questionnaire was one of eleven instruments administered in one of two fixed orders, to assure variety in item and response structure. Total testing time was approximately one hour, with the realism questionnaire taking about 10 minutes. Second graders were tested individually by a researcher to whom they had been randomly assigned. Sixth and tenth graders completed all questionnaires on their own in medium to large same-age groups. They were monitored by a researcher who gave instructions, answered questions, and periodically checked that children were filling out the questionnaires correctly. The researchers were all students or faculty associated with the research project.

Adults filled out only the realism questionnaire, in an informal setting. Prior to data collection, they were asked if they were familiar with "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," and "Diff'rent Strokes." All three were very popular with the child sample tested during the '86-'87 school year, and, in 1989, all three shows were still being broadcast in the Los Angeles area. The adults then were asked to complete the realism

questionnaire for any of the three shows with which they were familiar. Testing time for adults was about 5-10 minutes for each series. Testing time for an adult who was familiar with all three series ranged from 10 minutes to half an hour, depending on the number of series for which they were filling out the questionnaire.

Questionnaire

The realism instrument consisted of 13 questions. There were four questions about the realism of the feelings on the show, three about family actions and rules, five about demographics, and one about the overall realism of the series. The questions were phrased to test the respondent's perception of the representativeness of the series: "How many families in our country (have the same kind of home as the television family?)." The respondent circled boxes representing percentages ranging from 0% to 100% in increments of 20%. Each box was darkened according to the percentage it represented. Earlier work with this format indicated that even young children can understand it (Kovaric, 1985). The five demographic items were as follows: the kind of home the television family has, the amount of money and things the television family has, the number of real parents living at home in the television family, the number of grown-ups and kids in the television family, and the number of Black and White people in the television family (derived from Doubleday, 1986). Each child completed the questionnaire twice, once for each of his or her two most frequently viewed family formatted television shows, chosen from a list of all such series being broadcast in the Los Angeles area at the time the child was tested. The number of series on the list ranged from 20 to 25, depending on the date of testing. The adults completed the questionnaire for up to three series, based on their familiarity with each. These three series, "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," and "Diff'rent Strokes," were chosen after determining which series were chosen most often by the second, sixth, and tenth graders.

Exploratory factor analysis using only the child data resulted in a two factor solution where items about demographic variables loaded on one factor and the items about emotional expression and actions, not analyzed in this study, loaded on the second factor. The two general realism items, one for each show chosen, were not included in the factor analysis because they infer a broader level of analysis than the twelve other specific realism items. Cronbach Alphas were .51 for general realism (2 items) and .74 for the demographic questions (10 items).

Results

A subset of the child data was selected to test the effects of age, ethnic match, and specific series on perceived realism. The child sample was restricted in all analyses in two ways. First, all analyses were conducted using only those subjects who chose "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," or "Diff'rent Strokes" as one of their two most frequently viewed shows, for a total of 858 subjects (see Table 1 for sample demographics). While the sample is fairly evenly distributed over the three grades and two genders, there are many more White subjects than minority subjects, and many more subjects chose "The Cosby Show" than either "Family Ties" or "Diff'rent Strokes." These three shows were very popular with all three age groups, and the series differ along interesting demographic dimensions. "The Cosby Show" portrays an upper-middle class intact Black family with five children. The family on "Family Ties" is middle to upper-middle class, White, and intact, and has three or four children, depending on the broadcast season being evaluated. "Diff'rent Strokes" portrays an upper class White man who adopts two Black children from Harlem. They live in a Manhattan penthouse with the father's natural daughter, a White housekeeper, and, in later seasons, a White stepmother and her natural son. Further restricting the sample, subjects who chose two of the three series as their two favorites were always deleted from the analyses because they would have had two sets of responses in the data, thereby necessitating a repeated measures design. Since the vast majority of subjects who chose any of the three series chose only one of them, a repeated measures design was not appropriate.

Insert Table 1 about here

Means for the general realism item and the five demographic items by age and series chosen are presented in Table 2. Means for the adult sample are included.

Insert Table 2 about here

The scores from the adult subjects were used as an anchor point to determine the "accurate" answer to the realism items. Three one-way MANOVA's were conducted, one for each series, using both the child and the adult data, with age (4) as the independent variable and all six realism items as the dependent variables in order to establish the differences between adult and child scores. Analyses that tested among-grade differences are described below. These analyses established that adult scores are lower than child scores for the majority of the realism items across series. In addition, they demonstrate that lower perceived realism scores are more accurate, assuming that the adults' scores are reasonable indicators of accuracy. In "The Cosby Show" MANOVA, there was a significant effect for age, E for Wilks's Lambda (18, 1641)=9.51, p=.0001. Tukey's post-hoc tests showed that adult scores for all the items but "the number of real parents living at home" were significantly lower than all those for other age groups. Adult scores for the number of real parents living at home were significantly lower than the scores for the second and sixth but not the tenth graders.

The "Family Ties" MANOVA showed a significant main effect for age, F for Wilks's Lambda (18, 439)= 4.66, p=.0001. Tukey's post-hoc tests showed that scores for adults on the overall realism item were significantly lower than those for all other ages. For the amount of money and things the television family has, adult scores were significantly lower than both sixth and tenth graders' scores. For the number of real parents living at home, adult scores were significantly lower than both the second and sixth graders' scores. For the kind of home the television family has and the number of grown-ups and kids in the television family, adult scores were significantly lower than the sixth graders' scores. There were no significant differences between any age group for the number of Black and White people in the television family.

The MANOVA for "Diff'rent Strokes" yielded similar results. Again, there was a significant main effect for age, F for Wilks's Lambda (18, 535)=5.69, p=.0001. Tukey's post-hoc test showed that adult scores were significantly lower than all child scores on the general realism item, the kind of home the television family has, and the number of Black and White people in the television family. For the amount of money and things the television family has, adult scores were significantly lower than both second and sixth graders' scores. For the number of grown-ups and kids in the television family, adult scores were significantly lower than second graders' scores. There were no significant differences between any age group for the number of real parents living at home in the television family.

Using just child data, a three-way MANOVA was then conducted with age (3), ethnicity (4) and series chosen (3) as independent variables, and with all five demographic realism items and the overall realism item as the dependent measures to test for age, ethnicity, and series differences in realism scores. There were significant effects for age, F for Wilks's Lambda (12, 1592)=1.94, p=.026, and for series chosen, F for Wilks's Lambda (12, 1592)=3.98, p=.0001, as well as a significant age by series interaction, F for Wilks's Lambda (24, 2778)=1.57, p=.038. There were no effects for ethnicity of the subject, nor any interaction between ethnicity and age or series. The univariate analyses revealed a significant age by series interaction for the number of grown-ups and kids in the television family, F(4, 801)=2.87, p=.0222. Tests of simple main effects showed that second graders' scores were significantly higher than sixth graders' scores for "Diff'rent Strokes." There was also an age main effect, F (2, 801)=5.80, p=.0032, and a series main effect, F(2, 801)=5.51, p=.0042, for the number of real parents living at home in the television family; Tukey (HSD) tests showed that tenth graders' scores were significantly lower than both second and sixth graders' scores, and scores for "Diff'rent Strokes" were significantly lower than scores for both "The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties." There were also significant series effects in this analysis. For both the amount of money and things the television family has, F(2, 801)=4.08, p=.0173, and the number of Black and White people in the television family, F (2, 801)=6.70, p=.0013, scores for "Diff'rent Strokes" were significantly lower according to Tukey's tests than scores for both "The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties." This analysis provides some evidence for the influence of age and specific series on perceived realism and therefore provides support for Hypothesis 1, but it fails to provide evidence for the influence of ethnic match suggested in Hypothesis 2.

Because no effects for ethnic match were found in the above analysis, several more analyses were conducted to specifically test for effects of ethnic match. They

included analyzing the responses a subsample of White children for differences in their ratings of the three series, testing ethnic differences among only those children who rated "The Cosby Show," and analyzing the results from a more ethnically balanced subsample using all three series. None of these analyses lent any support to the hypothesis that ethnic match will influence perceived realism scores, so they will not be reported in detail here.

Since the analyses showed little support for effects of ethnic match on perceived realism of demographics or general realism, a second MANOVA using all the children who chose "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," or "Diff'rent Strokes" as one of their favorite shows was conducted, this time with only age (3) and series (3) as independent variables. The reduced number of factors added several degrees of freedom taken up by ethnicity and its interactions in the initial three-way MANOVA, allowing for a more effective test of the influence of age and series on perceived realism. This MANOVA showed a main effect for age, F for Wilks's Lambda (14, 1674)=4.45, p=.0001, a main effect for series, F for Wilks's Lambda (12, 1672)=9.80, p=.0001, and an age by series interaction, F for Wilks's Lambda (24, 2918)=2.04, p=.002. The age and series main effects and the age by series interaction are significant just as in the previous analysis, but the significance levels are much better, indicating that dropping ethnicity from this analysis was beneficial.

The univariate analyses for the individual realism items were then examined in more detail using post-hoc pairwise comparisons. The following is a report of the results for each of the six items. For the general realism item, there were main effects for both age, F (2,841)=11.91, p=.0001, and for series, F (2, 841) = 4.67, p=.0096. Tukey (HSD) comparisons show that tenth graders' scores are lower than both second and sixth graders' scores. While the between-series comparisons did not reveal any statistically significant differences, the scores for "Diff'rent Strokes" were lower than the scores for both "The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties" (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

The "amount of money and things" item showed a main effect for series, F (2,841)=13.66. p=.0001. The age main effect and age by series interaction were not significant. Post-hoc comparisons showed that all subjects combined rated the amount of money and things on "Diff'rent Strokes" as less realistic than the amount of money and things on either "The Cosby Show" or "Family Ties" (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

The "kind of home the family has" item showed a main effect for series chosen, F(2,841)=12.20, p=.0001. The age main effect and the age by series interaction were not significant. Post-hoc comparisons revealed that the kind of home on "Diff'rent Strokes" was judged to be less realistic than the kind of home the family has on either "The Cosby Show" or "Family Ties" (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

The "number of real parents living at home" item showed a significant main effect for age, F (2, 841)=13.15, p=.0001, a significant main effect for series, F (2, 841)=22.32, p=.0001, and a significant age by series interaction, F (4, 841)=2.40 p=.0489. While there were no significant age differences for "Diff'rent Strokes", a single parent family, there were significant age differences for "The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties," both intact families with two natural parents. For "The Cosby Show," realism ratings for this item decreased significantly between second and sixth grade, and between sixth and tenth grade. For "Family Ties," the tenth graders' scores were significantly lower than both the second and sixth graders' scores (see Figure 4).

Insert Figure 4 about here

The "number of grown ups and kids" item showed a significant age by series interaction, F (4, 841)=2.60, p=.035. The age main effect and the age by series interaction were not significant. There were no significant main effects. Post-hoc comparisons showed that sixth graders believed the family constellation on "Diff'rent Strokes" to be less realistic than did the second graders (see Figure 5). There were no significant age differences for either "The Cosby Show" or "Family Ties."

Insert Figure 5 about here

The "number of Black and White people" item showed a significant effect for series, F (2, 876)=32.23, p=.0001. The age main effect and the age by series interaction were not significant. "Diff'rent Strokes" was rated as less realistic than both "The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties" for this item (see Figure 6).

Insert Figure 6 about here

Hypothesis 3 was then tested. If Hypothesis 3 is correct, scores for highly realistic or unrealistic items should not differ by age, whereas scores for items that are somewhat realistic should show a decrease with age. In order to identify highly realistic, somewhat realistic, and unrealistic items, adult scores were used as an anchor. There were a total of 18 items in the item pool--six from each of the three series. Items were ranked according to the mean score assigned by the adults (see Table 2 for item means). Ideally, the top , middle , and bottom items in the adults' perceptions of all three series would have been combined to create composite scores for highly realistic, somewhat realistic, and unrealistic items. But because data from only one series were examined for each child, subscores could only be calculated using one series for each composite.

Examination of the rankings showed that the adults considered "Family Ties," to be the most realistic of the three series, followed by "The Cosby Show" and then

"Diff'rent Strokes." Based on the distribution of adult scores, either three or four items were selected for each series to create subscores for highly unrealistic, somewhat realistic, and highly realistic content. General realism, the number of Black and White people, the kind of home, and the amount of money, the four least realistic items for "Diff'rent Strokes," made up the unrealistic subscore; the kind of home the family has, the number of Black and White people, and the number of grown-ups and kids, the three middle realism items from "The Cosby Show," made up the somewhat realistic subscore; and the kind of home, the number of grown-ups and kids, the number of real parents living at home, and the number of Black and White people, the four most realistic items from "Family Ties," made up the highly realistic subscore. Intercorrelations for items on each subscore ranged from .057 to .456, with 87% of the intercorrelations significant at the .05 level.

The three subscores were then used in an age (3) by realism level (3) ANOVA. This analysis yielded a significant main effect for age, $F(2, 867)=6.59$, $p=.0014$, a significant main effect for realism level, $F(2, 876)=29.28$, and a significant age by realism level interaction, $F(4, 867)=3.11$, $p=.0148$. Subsequent tests of simple main effects showed that scores do not differ by age for the unrealistic composite. This supports Hypothesis 3. However, the age differences for the other two realism levels are not in accordance with Hypothesis 3. Using the Bonferroni correction, there are no significant age differences for the somewhat realistic composite, although the differences are in the expected direction. For the highly realistic items, Tukey tests showed that the tenth graders' scores are significantly lower than both the second and sixth graders' scores, again contrary to the hypothesis.

Insert Figure 7 about here

Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that the age of the evaluator influences perceived realism scores and the notion that, in general, perceived realism scores decrease with age. When there was a significant effect for age in the analyses, younger children's perceptions of social reality were always higher than those of older children. In no case were age effects due to an increase in perceived realism scores with age. Moreover, adult perceptions were always a great deal lower than those for children of any grade. Furthermore, with age, the standard deviations for perceived realism scores shrink, indicating greater consensus among subjects as they get older. All this provides support for the hypothesis that, with age, children's increasing real-world experience can provide for more accurate evaluation of the realism of family television shows. It is also congruent with the idea that, with age, children learn more about the production aspects of television which in turn leads to lower perceived realism scores, although this is not directly tested in this study. In addition, the decrease in realism scores may also be due to cognitive development. Older children are cognitively more able to compare what they see on television with what they see in the real world, leading to lower perceived realism scores.

It is interesting to note that the ratings from the tenth graders' perceptions of the realism of television families were still not as low as those from the adults, indicating that even after adolescence, people gather real world knowledge that aids in making perceived realism judgments. Also, adults may be even more skeptical about television in general because they know more about the economics and production processes of the broadcast industry and their cognitive development is more advanced, leading to even lower perceived realism ratings.

The data in this study did not support the hypothesis that ethnic match will influence perceived realism scores. Perhaps a match on ethnicity alone is not powerful enough to influence a child's ratings of perceived realism. As stated earlier, perceived similarity to and identification with television characters on some dimensions is an important variable in recall of shows. It makes sense to argue that perceived similarity would also provide the viewer with the confidence that he or she know a lot about the content being presented and could judge its realism quite accurately. This study did not assess the viewer's own perceived similarity; rather it assumed that an ethnic match with the television family made the viewer feel similar to the television family. It is possible, however, that children do not perceive television families as matching or similar to their own family simply on the basis of ethnicity. Perhaps a different dimension of match might influence realism ratings, such as match on similarity of experiences or emotional expression. Also, the realism items in this study all described domains that all children know something about. It is possible that items about topics that many young children know less about would show an effect for ethnic match, or an effect for match along some other dimension.

The data provided partial support for the hypothesis that developmental patterns in perceived realism would vary according the the actual realism of the content being judged. In accordance with the hypothesis, there was no age change for the unrealistic items when adults were used as the anchor. Even young children

can recognize highly unrealistic elements of a show. For example, there were no age differences in perceived realism for the number of Black and White people in the family or for the home the family lives in on "Diff'rent Strokes." Second graders understood that this family makeup was not very common in the United States and that penthouses are not usual homes. This shows that for highly unrealistic content, there will be little or no age change. It would be interesting to study children younger than the second grade to assess when children become able to recognize highly unrealistic live-action television content about demographic characteristics.

Realism scores for the highly realistic items, contrary to the hypothesis, did decrease with age. It is possible that young children are able to recognize highly unrealistic demographic elements of television programs, but cannot yet accurately evaluate moderately or highly realistic elements. Perhaps events or aspects of shows that are incongruous with what children usually experience in the real world are more salient or conspicuous than elements of shows that blend easily into viewers' schemas and scripts. Therefore, the highly unrealistic elements may be easier for young children to recognize and evaluate. It is important to note, however, that the levels of realism could be confounded with series because of the way the composite scores were calculated. Composite scores based on a variety of programs may yield different results that could provide stronger support for the hypothesis that developmental patterns in perceived realism would vary according the the actual realism of the content being judged.

This study provides support for use of specific items and familiar content when evaluating perceived realism. It is important that the experimenter define narrow categories for subjects when they are making perceived realism judgments. Although it is not possible for a researcher to ascertain exactly what subjects are considering when assessing perceived realism, specific items about specific television programs can help clarify the content of particular realism judgments. While broad perceived realism judgments can sometimes be informative, specific items help pinpoint viewers' perceptions of what is realistic and unrealistic content.

The analyses of many of the individual realism items show that the series being evaluated by the subject as well as the specific characteristics of that series have a strong influence on developmental trends. If researchers have a grasp of exactly what the subjects are evaluating, interpretation of results becomes easier. For example, the number of real parents living at home on "Diff'rent Strokes," a single parent household headed by a father, was rated as less realistic than the number of real parents on "The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties," which both portray intact families. What is more interesting are the developmental trends within each series. For "Diff'rent Strokes," there are no age differences in the ratings of this item. All children seem to be aware that this show presents an unusual family make-up. For the two intact family shows, however, there are strong developmental trends. This indicates that young children, who are less likely to have experience with divorce and single parent families, think two-parent families are more realistic than do older children who have had more exposure to divorce through their own families or through families of their friends.

The ratings of the amount of money and things the television family has also varied with the series being evaluated. It is not surprising that "Diff'rent Strokes,"

which portrays a very wealthy family, was rated as less realistic on this variable than both the other shows. More interestingly, for both "The Cosby Show" and "Diff'rent Strokes," the shows that portray wealthier families, the second graders rated this item as more realistic than did the tenth graders. It appears that there is still some learning about economics and socioeconomic status through early adolescence, especially about the proportion of wealthy people in this country.

As the above examples indicate, careful interpretation of specific realism items can enhance explanations for age differences in perceived realism. This study also tried to insure that all subjects were using the same definition of realism by operationalizing realism as a percentage of the families living in this country. This does not mean, however, that all age groups interpreted the scale in the same way. It is unlikely that tenth graders really believe that 30% of the families in our country are of mixed ethnicity. Perhaps the scale should not be interpreted literally, but should instead be seen as a more holistic measure of true perceived realism.

There are many ways of thinking about what "realism" means. In this study, "realism" was operationalized to mean "representativeness." One benefit of this method is that subjects are forced to use a somewhat concrete standard, hopefully helping subjects to all use the same definition of realism. In this study, "realistic" means "likely to happen." While we do not have validity data for this measure, we assume, at least for the older children and adults who define "realistic" as "probable," we are really measuring perceived realism. Although the younger children were forced to use the older children's standard, their answers suggested that they were able to conceptualize realism in this way.

There are, however, other equally valid ways of thinking about realism that may yield different results. For example, something could be realistic even though it may not occur very often in the real world. For example, families of mixed ethnicity, while not common, are realistic in the sense that they do occur. Also, one could ask the realism question in a different way, assessing how realistic is a portrayal for a more narrow segment of the population. For example, one could ask, "How many middle-class Black families in our country have the same number of real parents living at home as the television family in 'The Cosby Show'?" In this way, a portrayal could be accurate for a smaller segment of the population, and therefore, realistic. All of these different ways of defining realism should be explored. It is possible that some ways of assessing realism may yield higher perceived realism scores than others, and that some may follow different developmental progressions, or progress at differing rates. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind alternative definitions of realism when conducting perceived realism research.

Several other lines of research are suggested by this study. Effects of match, not supported here, may be found using other measures of match and perceived realism. A child's perception of his or her own similarity to the television family in several domains, not just demographics, may yield more promising results. It would be important to find out what program variables influence match at different ages. It is possible that, as Newcomb and Collins (1979) found, demographic matches can influence perceived realism at early ages. Older children and adults may need more sophisticated and complex match dimensions such as the television family's parenting

style or attitudes toward political and moral issues in order for match to influence perceived realism.

There are large differences in the perceived demographic realism of television shows that feature families. How will these differences mediate learning and behavior resulting from viewing these very popular shows? It is possible that, if a show is considered to be demographically unrealistic, viewers will be more likely to disregard messages about emotion rules and social and behavioral norms portrayed on these shows. It is also possible that demographically unrealistic shows will have less of an impact on viewing-related behavior. In some cases, it would be desirable for a show to have an impact on its viewers, for people to learn something from the program; this is especially true for television shows with explicit positive educational goals. On the other hand, there are instances where learning from television would not be preferable, as in the case of television violence. One would not want television violence to be carried out by demographically realistic characters because children may accept the violent portrayal as reality, thereby propagating the idea that violence is acceptable and the norm. In either case, however, it is important to investigate the influence of perceived realism as a mediator of television effects.

It would also be important to further investigate the influence of various kinds of realism on television effects. For example, do animated (less surface realism) programs teach prosocial messages as well as live action (more surface realism) shows? Do children learn as well from animated people or animated non-human creatures? Or is it the content of the program, not its appearance, that makes a difference? Would a show that is demographically unrealistic but emotionally realistic be less effective at teaching prosocial behavior than a show that was more demographically realistic? These questions have special significance to producers of children's educational televisions shows. Often, shows with prosocial or educational messages will be demographically unrealistic or will be animated. How does this influence children's learning from these programs? This question is especially appropriate when applied to very young children who are still struggling to understand that a cartoon is not real. These issues warrant further research.

This study brings up an interesting question: Is television presenting a demographically unrealistic picture of the "real world?" The adults in this study seem to feel that popular family television shows are quite unrepresentative of the real world. Yet these depictions of American families could be shaping children's world views. Our data, taken literally, show that second graders believe that 40% of the families in our country have the same amount of money and things as the family on "Diff'rent Strokes." It is possible that second graders' scores are so inflated because of the demographically unrealistic picture that television presents. Of course, as real-world knowledge increases, the perceived realism scores do decrease. However, this does not mean that older children's, and perhaps even adults', perceived realism scores are not influenced by the demographics they see on television. Because television presents a distorted picture of the real world, and yet is often a major source of intimate experience with families other than one's own, both children's and adult's views may be distorted as well.

In general, this study supported the hypotheses that younger children assign higher realism scores to family television programs than do older children, and that the series and specific content the children are evaluating are important as well. Perceived realism researchers need to use this information when designing new studies. This could bring about a deeper understanding of influences on perceived realism, and how perceived realism operates to influence learning from television.

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Table 1

Frequencies of Subjects Who Chose "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," or "Diff'rent Strokes"

	Series Chosen					
	The Cosby Show		Family Ties		Diff'rent Strokes	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2nd Grade						
White	49	58	12	13	36	41
Black	4	6	0	0	2	0
Hispanic	4	4	1	0	2	2
Asian	2	2	1	0	3	1
6th Grade						
White	54	90	23	17	29	15
Black	12	10	2	1	1	1
Hispanic	8	9	1	1	1	2
Asian	7	10	2	2	4	3
10th Grade						
White	75	111	25	20	17	6
Black	11	11	0	0	1	1
Hispanic	8	8	4	0	4	2
Asian	1	2	2	1	0	0

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Numbers of Subjects for All Individual Items by Series Chosen and Age of Subject

		The Cosby Show			
Item		Second	Sixth	Tenth	Adult
General	m	2.63	2.71	2.31	0.92
	sd	(1.41)	(1.13)	(1.07)	(0.82)
	n	134	199	224	38
Money/ Things		2.47	2.21	2.16	1.13
		(1.34)	(1.06)	(0.84)	(0.67)
		134	204	233	38
Home		2.41	2.17	2.23	1.26
		(1.45)	(1.14)	(0.90)	(0.69)
		134	206	232	38
Parents at Home		3.22	2.89	2.39	2.18
		(1.36)	(1.35)	(1.51)	(0.69)
		134	206	233	38
Grownups and Kids		2.46	2.18	2.42	1.63
		(1.30)	(1.22)	(0.94)	(0.79)
		134	204	233	38
Black/White People		2.52	2.20	2.33	1.47
		(1.40)	(1.26)	(1.01)	(1.08)
		133	206	232	38

Note: Larger numbers indicate higher realism scores. A score of 1 equals 20% of the families in our country. A score of 2 equals 40% of the families in our country.

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

	Family Ties			
Item	Second	Sixth	Tenth	Adult
General	2.93	2.69	2.08	1.38
	(1.54)	(1.24)	(1.07)	(0.86)
	27	48	53	37
Money/	2.11	2.45	2.47	1.68
Things	(1.25)	(0.97)	(0.89)	(0.82)
	27	51	57	37
Home	2.11	2.55	2.21	1.84
	(1.53)	(1.05)	(0.94)	(1.01)
	27	51	57	37
Parents at	3.26	3.08	2.18	2.19
Home	(1.35)	(1.23)	(1.06)	(.62)
	27	51	56	37
Grownups	2.52	2.65	2.30	1.92
and Kids	(1.34)	(1.11)	(0.93)	(.98)
	27	51	57	37
Black/White	2.93	2.41	2.18	2.43
People	(1.62)	(1.50)	(1.42)	(1.23)
	27	51	56	37

Note: Larger numbers indicate higher realism scores. A score of 1 equals 20% of the families in our country. A score of 2 equals 40% of the families in our country.

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

	Diff'rent Strokes			
Item	Second	Sixth	Tenth	Adult
General	2.57 (1.37) 90	2.21 (1.16) 57	1.81 (0.83) 27	0.23 (0.43) 26
Money/ Things	2.09 (1.24) 91	1.67 (1.15) 57	1.45 (0.99) 31	0.86 (0.76) 28
Home	1.96 (1.23) 91	1.67 (1.11) 57	1.55 (0.89) 31	0.64 (0.68) 28
Parents at Home	2.19 (1.32) 91	1.97 (1.17) 58	2.13 (1.15) 31	1.64 (0.91) 28
Grownups and Kids	2.73 (1.36) 90	2.07 (1.13) 57	2.52 (1.00) 31	1.93 (1.15) 28
Black/White People	1.47 (1.21) 91	1.47 (1.22) 58	1.52 (0.96) 31	0.36 (0.56) 28

Note: Larger numbers indicate higher realism scores. A score of 1 equals 20% of the families in our country. A score of 2 equals 40% of the families in our country.

Figure 1. Perceived realism scores for the general realism item by age of subject and series chosen.

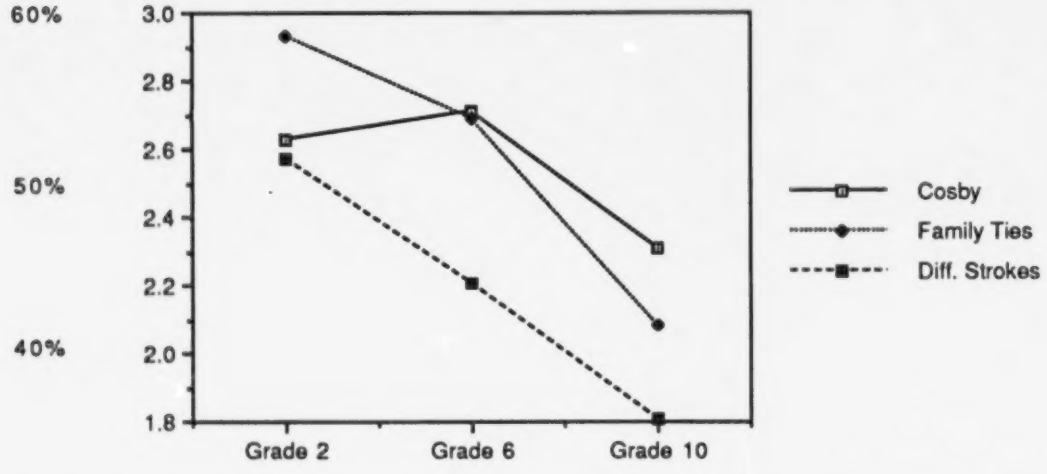
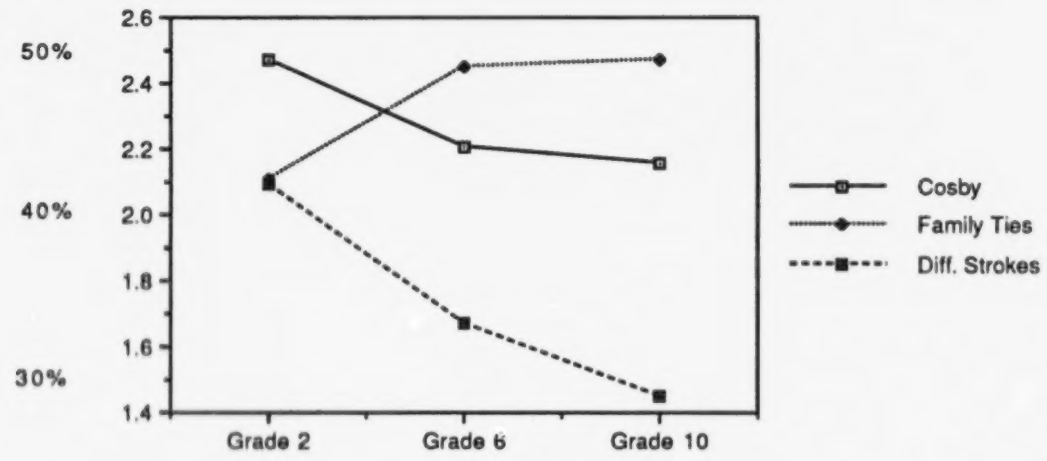


Figure 2. Perceived realism scores for the amount of money and things the television family has item by age of subject and series chosen.



Note: A change of 1.0 on the realism scale translates to a change of 20% of "families in our country."

Figure 3. Perceived realism scores for the kind of home the television family lives in item by age of subject and series chosen.

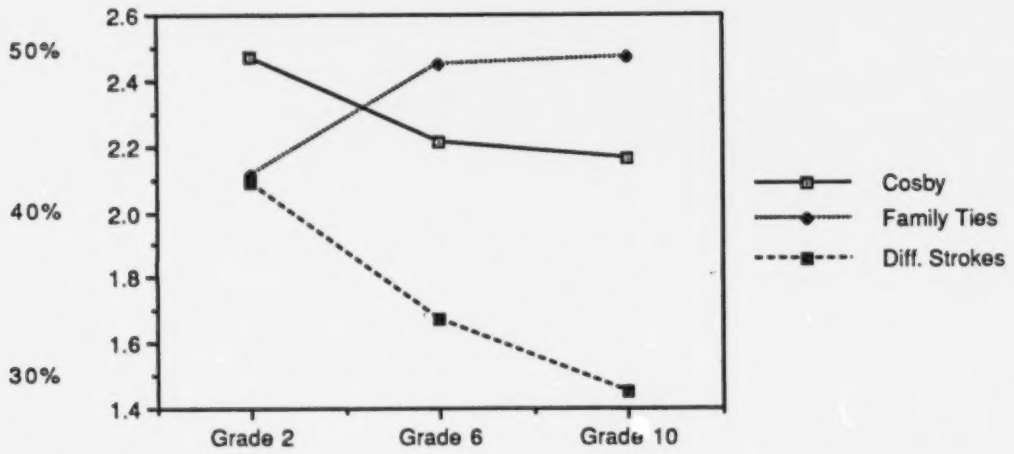
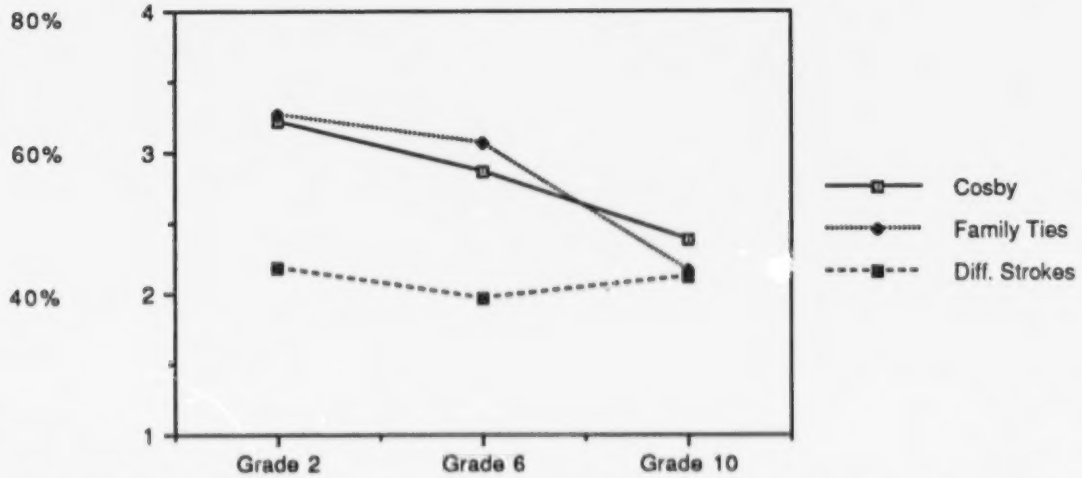


Figure 4. Perceived realism scores for the number of real parents living at home item by age of subject and series chosen.



Note: A change of 1.0 on the realism scale translates to a change of 20% of "families in our country."

Figure 5. Perceived realism scores for the number of grown-ups and kids item by age of subject and series chosen.

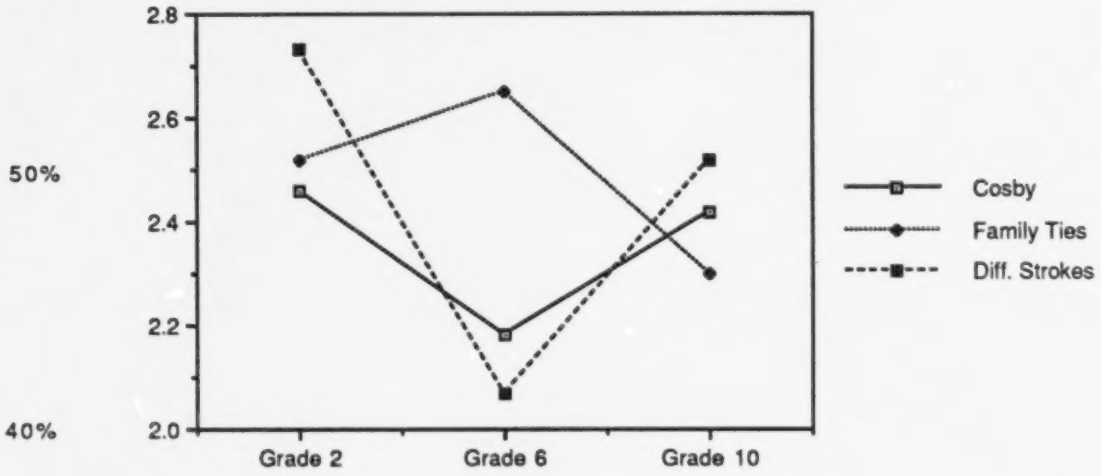
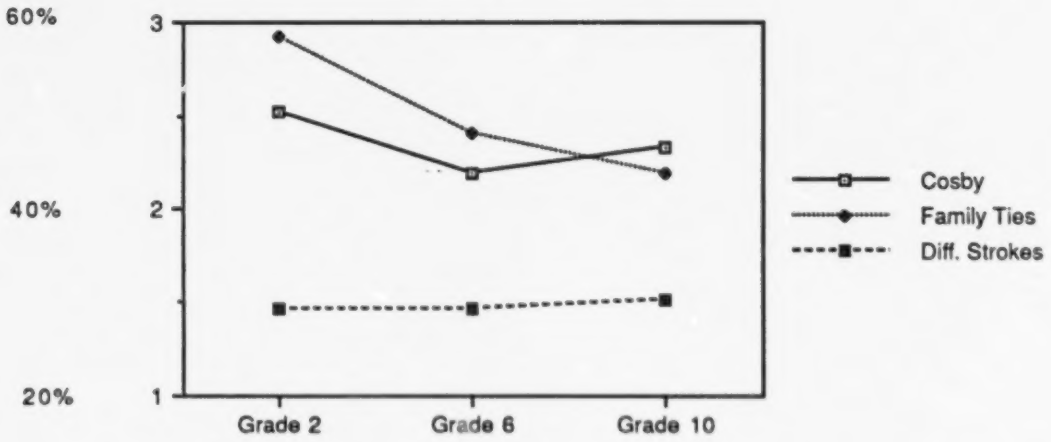
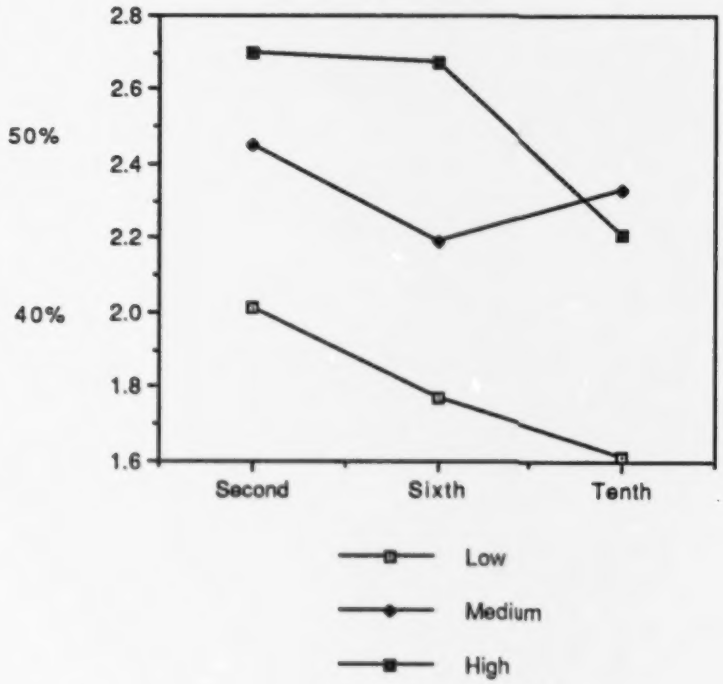


Figure 6. Perceived realism scores for the number of Black and White people in the television family item by age of subject and series chosen.



Note: A change of 1.0 on the realism scale translates to a change of 20% of "families in our country."

Figure 7. Perceived realism composite scores by age of subject and realism level. Adult scores were used as anchor point.



Note: A change of 1.0 on the realism scale translates to a change of 20% of "families in our country."